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AUTHOR McQuade, Marcia T.
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ABSTRACT

The "informal process" for writing reports, which incorporates the mechanics of textbook theory but emphasizes the composition process, may be more successful for teaching fifth graders how to write reports than the traditional approach. This process recommends a number of nontraditional teaching methods. Student choice of topic should be encouraged through the sociable, class activity of brainstorming. Since studies show that determining contradictions in source material is one of the more difficult tasks involved in research, children should read the easiest sources first to eliminate confusion. Students tend to take notes verbatim, a habit which can be countered if students are given specific questions encouraging them to look for distinct pieces of information, while intuitive organizational abilities can be developed through student/teacher conferences throughout the writing process. The following organizational technique for report writing may prove useful: (1) write thoughts at random, (2) cut apart the text in order to organize piles of related text, (3) assemble related material, and (4) edit and revise. Grammar, punctuation, spelling and other mechanics can be taught as mini lessons throughout the report writing period. Reports should be assigned more than once a year and two months should be allowed for instruction in the writing process, with structured writing time set aside each day. Twenty-four references are provided. (JD)

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MARCIA T. MCQUADE

52 Sagamore Rd., Apt. D6

Bronxville, NY 10708

August 6, 1986

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Implications for Teaching Report Writing

Using the Informal Process

Teachers who assign term papers, reports, or research projects have certain complaints about the finished exposition. From the elementary grades through the college level, the existing criticisms about the students' papers are the inability to limit topics, the lack of organization, and the persistence of plagiarism.

Teachers may need to look to themselves for a solution. Teaching techniques may need to be reevaluated. Different ways of showing students what is required may need to be devised. When a report is presented, too much emphasis is placed on the so-called mechanics---gathering information, notetaking, outlining---that lead to a product. If the approach to writing a report concentrated on the process, the resulting material might stand a better chance of success. The process needs to stress composition as well as mechanics.

The Informal Process incorporates the mechanics of the textbook theory and goes on to emphasize the process of composition. This study will compare this approach to the more traditional one discussed above. If this newer method is found to be more successful, then the use of it may eliminate the aforementioned criticisms.

In order to understand children's ability to do research, it is important to know how a child learns how to write. Piaget's theory stated that a child grows in stages of mental as well as

physical development. Fifth graders would be at his Concrete Operations Level (seven to eleven years). At this level children are learning to organize, classify and relate to past experiences. Bruner (1966) assessed this period as that of making choices between alternatives, sequencing and learning how to give time and attention to these numerous demands. This Concrete Operations Level is a foundation for the forthcoming stage that occurs in adolescents, that of Formal Operations. At this level students deal with higher forms of cognition--abstraction and deductive logic. Doing research involves many skills that involve these higher forms of thinking.

Incorporating Piaget's and Bruner's (1966) theories with those of current investigators of writing (Calkins, 1983; Jacobs, 1984; Marik, 1982; Moffett, 1968; Petrovsky & Brozick, 1979; Yates, 1983), one can see that writing of any form requires higher cognitive development. Information at this time is limited as to what specific areas of the writing process need a more thorough examination (Calkins, 1982). This paper examines specifically report writing (or research), also referred to as content area writing by Yates (1983), or investigative writing by Jacobs (1984) in order to learn how children can acquire the process and the skills.

The purpose of reserach is searching, collecting, organizing, interpreting and evaluating data beyond what the researcher already knows. Data can be obtained from primary sources (autobiographies,

personal correspondence, interviews) and secondary sources (books, magazines, reports). Research is not only important for the researcher but also for those who read his work.

When studying the textbook approach and the Informal Process to report writing, there are specific areas that could influence children's interest and ability in pursuing assignments. Beach (1983), Beck (1981), Calkins (1983), Dawson, Elwell, Johnson, & Zollinger (1978), Freed & Freed (1981), Jacobs (1984), Soven (1980), Tiedt & Bruemmer (1983) stated that there is much merit in student choice of topic. Students who choose what they want to write about have a vested interest in their work. They have ownership. Calkins (1983) and Beach (1983) felt that having objects of interest brought in by the students stimulates writing ability. The children can see and touch these objects. If children become dependent on teachers for their topics, they lose motivation and creativity.

The Informal Process helps the student select a topic by using sociable, whole-class activities in which students call out any or all ideas of interest. The teacher writes all volunteered information. This technique is called brainstorming. It has been used at all grade levels through college because it promotes class excitement which leads to greater mental activity. Brainstorming has been suggested by Beach (1983), Beck (1981), Calkins (1983), Five (1984), Jacobs (1984), Yates (1983). Whereas Dawson et al. (1978) in the textbook approach,

use exercises to establish rules of subject choice. Therefore, the sociability and camraderie are absent in this process. The textbook uses commands, such as "choose", "select", "limit". Moffett (1968) stated that the textbook approach is detrimental to children's adventurous spirits.

One of the more difficult tasks that research sets is that of determining contradictions in source materials, This was found by several studies (Beach, 1983; Campbell, 1984; McKenzie, 1979; Pinsel & Pinsel, 1982). It has been strongly suggested by Calkins (1983) and Five (1984) that children read the easiest sources first to help eliminate this confusion. Beck (1981), Grossberg & Mohr (1984), Larson (1982), Pinsel & Pinsel (1982), Teidt & Bruemmer (1983), Trzyna (1983) gave less emphasis to secondary sources of information. They adhered to interviews (primary sources) to avoid some of the pitfalls--plagiarism, lack of personal voice and audience, and relevancy in various sources. Five (1984) recommended using encyclopedias for finding specific facts after reading easier sources. Dawson et al. (1978) in the textbook approach suggested using different sources of information. There are exercises with directions. However, the textbook is stating counsel to the student when the student is trying to think about the information of his topic (Moffett, 1968).

Notetaking skills are acquired slowly. In taking notes, students have a tendency to copy verbatim (or at best, change one word). Notetaking requires higher cognitive abilites. The

student is reading, abstracting, assimilating, organizing and synthesizing material simultaneously (Calkins, 1983; Jacobs, 1984; Moffett, 1968). Developing a list of specific questions to which a student must find the answers will help avoid copying because the child is looking for distinct pieces of information. These questions can be derived using brainstorming techniques again (Beach, 1983; Calkins, 1983; Five, 1984; Jacobs, 1984; McDonald, 1982; Pinsel & Pinsel, 1982; Tiedt & Bruemmer, 1983). In the textbook, Dawson et al. (1978) advocated the mechanics of notetaking but didn't give a process by which to accomplish this task.

If notes are taken in the child's own words, he is then said to have ownership within the writing task. Jacobs (1984) referred to this characteristic as personal idiom. Other researchers (Beach, 1983; Calkins, 1983; Campbell, 1984; Five, 1984; Freed & Freed, 1981; McDonald, 1982; Moffett, 1968) stated this ownership as using one's own voice. These same investigators believed that children should be told who will be reading their works. Will they be writing for each other, younger children or adults? Children need to say what they mean and can learn to do this in their own words.

Once a student has gathered information and taken notes, the problem of organizaing the material is next. The textbook approach is structured and specific, making the task more concrete by providing examples which can be followed. However, current research (Jacobs, 1984) stated that a teacher is wasting time trying to "show"

students how to organize their work. Children's organizing abilities are intuitive. Piagetian theory stated that the cognitive ability of the student at this age is not receptive to mechanical instruction alone, that of outlining or "first you find the topic sentence." Children at this stage can develop their own organization through numerous conferences throughout the entire writing process. Conferences involve teacher/student, student/student; and eventually, theses conferences can become internalized within the student. Conferences are the foundation of the Informal Process (Calkins, 1983; Five, 1984; Ganz, 1983; Jacobs, 1984; McDonald, 1982; Moffett, 1968; Petrosky & Brozick, 1979; Pinsel & Pinsel, 1982; Soven, 1980; Tiedt & Bruemmer, 1983; Yates, 1983). The teacher's position in conferencing is to teach students how to teach each other about their subject matter. Teachers set the example of asking universal or leading questions based on their involvement in the student's subject. Conferences develop necessary listening, speaking and reading skills that are important to research. Ultimately, the question-and-answer periods produce a logical written structure through the student's ability to confirm in his own words what he knows about his subject of choice.

In addition to conferences in the Informal Process, the following techniques are suggested by Calkins (1983) and Five (1984): writing thoughts at random (freewriting), writing on one side of a piece of paper, cutting apart the text to establish piles of

related material, assembling this related material, editing and revising. It is also recommended that grammar, punctuation, spelling and other mechanics be taught as mini lessons throughout the period of report writing.

Dawson et al. (1978) in the textbook approach did not address the amount of time that should be given to report writing, nor did they say how many reports should be assigned. On the other hand, Beach (1983), Calkins (1983), Five (1984) stressed the importance of more than one writing experience of this type per year. An extensive amount of classroom time is vital to the project's success. Five (1984) does not begin report writing until January of the fifth grade year and together with Calkins (1983) agreed that there should be a structured amount of time for writing every day within this assignment. Additionally, about two months total for the projects' work should be allowed.

Freed and Freed (1981) and Larson (1982) warned teachers about giving a research assignment at the end of a semester. By doing this, they are treating this kind of writing differently from other forms. It is thusly viewed as different by students. They meet it with trepidation. Therefore, it is important to treat report writing as any other form of writing.

Judging the cognitive level of ablility of students at this age and the mechanics within a research assignment, the Informal Process appears to lend itself more than adequately to writing successful papers. This newer approach addresses a process that

helps a student develop his own system of organization and reproduce researched material in an acceptable original text. Therefore, it is hypothesized that fifth graders who receive the Informal Process to report writing will have higher holistic scores than those who recieve only the textbook approach.

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